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Nonino: Smooth and Elegant Grappa from Friuli

On the whole I am more afraid of colourless liquids than anything else so image my apprehension when accepting an invitation to spend an afternoon tasting Grappa – that harsh, fire-like Italian spirit made from distilling the must of grapes. But meeting Antonella Nonino yesterday was an eye-opening experience and has completely changed my view of Grappa as a whole.

Grappa itself is not unlike vodka in the respect that there are cheap, poorly made spirits alongside smooth, well made and well thought out spirits and Grappa Nonino is one of those high quality spirits that leaves a sense of excitement on the palate, rather than that harsh feeling of drinking something akin to Tabasco.



Antonella Nonino

Nonino Grappa is a family run business that has been crafting single varietal Grappa in the north western Italian region of Friuli since 1897. In 1928 the family business moved from Roncha to its present location of Percoto and although producing Grappa itself, the idea for single varietal Grappa was born in 1973 by Benito and Giannola Nonino – the parents of Antonella. The distillery has been in operation for five generations of Nonino's to date.

On the whole, Grappa was made for the peasants and field workers to drink in winter to stay warm. Quality was not a major concern back in the days and the drink just served its purpose. But when the Nonino's began hand-crafting single varietal Grappa the thought process changed and, wanting to make the best Grappa in the world; one that was sophisticated and elegant, their single varietal Grappa's were born. Taking the ancient symbol for 'alcohol' – they created a logo and a set of fine Grappa which are now arguably the benchmark for Friulian Grappa.

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The Nonino Family

“The secret to making good Grappa is to distil the must fresh”, says Antonella. “On the whole we will begin distilling 3 days after the grapes are harvested and this freshness shows in the smoothness of the Grappa”.

“Grappa is best drunk in an open tulip style glass”, she goes on to say. “This allows the drinker to taste and smell the Grappa at the same time and enhances the experience of the drink itself”.



Nonino Tonic – a new take on the traditional Gin and Tonic

Wanting to constantly pioneer the Grappa industry and find new and novel ways to introduce Grappa to new drinkers, the Nonino sisters came up with the Nonino Tonic – a spin on Gin and Tonic but using Grappa instead of Gin. I have to say this is a super refreshing drink and honestly hard to say that I was drinking Grappa. It's super smooth and refreshing and would make an excellent aperitif for a cocktail party; it would also work well at patio parties, on the boat or just sitting in the evening sun after a tough days work.

Nonino's Grappa's are made from single varietal grapes including Moscato, Malvasia, Chardonnay, Merlot and a local indigenous grape called Picolit. This grape goes into their flagship Grappa Cru Monovitigno Picolit; a 50% alcohol Grappa that is smooth but hugely intense with spice on the palate but no fiery pain as it goes down the gullet. Paired with Parma ham and fig jam, it makes for an excellent and thought-provoking mouthful.

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The selection of Nonino Grappa available in Hong Kong

Other Grappa from Nonino includes the Grappa Tradizione Nonino 50 (best used for the Nonino Tonic) which has hints of spice, herbs and a touch of mint. The UE La Malvasia is a 38% Grappa (UE is actually a word and means 'grape' in the Friuli dialect) which is fruity, elegant and feminine in nature that has a touch of sweetness on the finish. Paired with smoked salmon there is a flavour explosion and is a stunning and interesting pairing! The Monovitigno Il Moscato is more floral and pungent with hints of rose petal on the finish.

“Good Grappa can be an excellent pairing for chocolate”, says Antonella and, the dubious side of me was taken aback by the pairing of the Monovitigno Lo Chardonnay Grappa which, when paired with chocolate truffles from Va Bene restaurant in Lan Kwai Fong is nothing short of erotic.

All told, this was maybe one of the most interesting tastings that I have done this year. Grappa is often misunderstood and oft maligned as a harsh, difficult to drink spirit. But, when quality Grappa is in your glass it can make for wholly memorable experience. Nonino Grappa is available in Hong Kong from ASC Fine Wines – for more information contact Kit Wong by email on KitWong@asc-wines.com